



HR Guidance

OFFICE OF HUMAN RESOURCES

**I. APPROVAL
DATE:**

November 3, 2011

II. NUMBER:

12-001G

III. SUBJECT:

The Use of Interview Panels at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA or Agency).

IV. PURPOSE:

To provide guidance on the proper use of interview panels to help ensure that candidates are evaluated in a fair and consistent manner that adheres to applicable federal laws and regulations on discrimination, merit system principles, and prohibited personnel practices.

V. DEFINITIONS:

(a) *Structured Interview*: An assessment method in which candidate's job-related competencies/knowledge skills, and abilities (KSAs) are evaluated using standard questions and the candidate's responses are rated systematically using predetermined criteria or benchmarks for all interviews for a particular job. In each structured interview the applicants are asked the same questions in the same sequence and are evaluated using a common rating scale based on proficiency levels of job-related competencies. *Unstructured* interviews are generally unreliable predictors of future performance because questions may not be the same for each candidate, the process is inconsistent or the assessment tools are invalid (i.e., relying on factors that do not address competencies/KSAs necessary for the job or asking questions that are unrelated to the duties to be performed). Generally, structured interviews ensure consistency and provide equal opportunity for each candidate to provide information.

(b) *Selecting Official (SO)*: A person having the authority to appoint, employ, or promote individuals to positions in an agency.

(c) *Subject Matter Expert (SME)*: A person with bona fide expert knowledge about what is required to perform the duties of a particular job. First-level supervisors or staff performing duties similar to the duties assigned to the vacant position often meet the expert criteria. Incumbents in the same or very similar positions and other individuals can also be used as SMEs if they have current and thorough knowledge of the job's requirements.

(d) *Assessment Tool*: A device or method used to measure the degree to which an applicant possesses the competencies or KSAs necessary for successful job performance. Examples of assessment tools include work samples and structured interviews.

VI. COVERAGE:

This guidance applies to panels convened to interview and assess candidates who apply under Delegated Examining or Merit Promotion procedures, Upward Mobility, or who apply for excepted service vacancies for which applications are solicited. If this guidance conflicts with the provisions of a collective bargaining agreement (CBA), contact your servicing Labor and Employee Relations office for additional guidance.

VII. AUTHORITY/ REFERENCES:

- Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, as amended
- 5 USC § 2301 - *Merit System Principles*
- 5 USC § 2302 - *Prohibited Personnel Practices*
- OPM - *Delegated Examining Operations Handbook* (DEOH)
- Agency Merit Promotion Plan
- U.S. Office of Personnel Management - *Structured Interviews: A Practical Guide*
- HR Policy Bulletin 08-007B - *Quality Assurance in the Hiring Process*

VIII. ROLES/ RESPONSIBILITIES:

(a) The Office of Human Resources (OHR): Will provide Agency guidance on the proper use of interview panels and will educate stakeholders on federal law and regulation regarding employment practices.

(b) Shared Service Centers (SSC):

(1) Will provide the Selecting Official with a certificate(s) of eligible candidates, electronic access to the applications of the eligible candidates on the certificate(s), and any other applicant materials necessary for the Selecting Official to make a selection from a certificate.

(2) Will advise the Selecting Official and panel members as necessary during the interview process.

(c) Selecting Official (SO): Is the individual ultimately responsible for making a selection from the certificate of eligibles and ensuring that the interview panel, regardless if he or she is on the panel, adheres to Agency policies, CBAs, and applicable federal laws and regulations on discrimination, merit system principles, and prohibited personnel practices.

(d) Panel Members: Are responsible for fairly interviewing and assessing eligible applicants and adhering to agency policies, CBAs, and applicable federal laws and regulations on

discrimination, merit system principles, and prohibited personnel practices.

IX. POLICY:

(a) The use of interview panels, while not mandatory, is strongly encouraged for supervisory GS 13-15 and Senior Executive Service (SES) positions. Although the guidance uses in-person interviews as a default, it also covers interviews conducted by telephone or videoconferencing.

(b) Regardless of the panel method used, the SO is responsible for ensuring the panel(s) are convened and complete their tasks in a timely manner. Examples of panel interview methods may include:

(1) There is only one interview panel and the SO is a member. The panel will interview and assess the candidates. The SO will use the information from the panel to either select or not select from the certificate of eligibles.

(2) The SO is not on the panel. The interview panel is used to narrow down the list of candidates. The panel convenes to evaluate and rate the candidates. The top candidates are referred to the SO. The SO then calls only the top candidates back for a second, one-on-one interview. The SO uses the information from the panel and the second interview to either select or not select from the certificate of eligibles.

(3) There are two interview panels. The first panel is convened to narrow down the list of candidates. The SO is not on the first panel. The top candidates are referred to the SO. The SO then calls only the top candidates back for a second panel interview. The SO is a member of the second panel. The SO uses the information from the first and the second panel to either select or not select from the certificate of eligibles.

(c) Please note, the use of multiple interview panels may increase the time to hire since multiple schedules will have to be coordinated (the panel members and the candidates) before a selection can be made, final security and reference checks conducted, and the candidate enters on duty.

(d) The candidates must be notified in advance of the interview method to be used by the SO or panel interview coordinator (see Section X(a), below).

(e) SOs should select the best candidate for the position(s) based on information obtained from the employment application, reference checks, interviews, performance appraisals, work samples, etc. Selection should be determined solely on the basis of KSAs which assure that all applicants receive equal opportunity.

(f) All employees and applicants for employment should receive fair and equitable treatment in all aspects of personnel management without regard to political affiliation, race, color, religion, national origin, sex (including pregnancy and gender identity/expression), marital status, age, disability, or parental status.

(g) Interview materials must be retained as an official record of agency activity. Information that must be retained includes:

(1) Date, time, place, and length of the interview;

(2) Name and job title of the interviewer(s);

(3) Interview questions, candidate ratings, and notes for each candidate;

(4) Information on any training or other preparation provided to the interviewer(s); and

(5) Interview guides, rating scales, assessment tools, and other materials used.

(h) The SO and panel members must safeguard all application and interview materials and protect personally identifiable information (PII).

(i) Specific information on agency record requirements can be found in the schedules listed in section XI. The SO may also contact the servicing HR SSC for guidance regarding personnel record retention.

(j) An interview panel should consist of at least three SMEs.

(k) The interview panel should be as diverse as possible.

(l) Interview panel procedures, questions, and rating methods should be predetermined, consistent, and the same for every candidate interviewed. A sample list of appropriate/inappropriate interview topics can be found in *Appendix A: Interview Questions*.

(m) The SO should immediately consult the servicing HR SSC if there are any questions or concerns about the interview process.

(n) In order to ensure equal opportunity and consistency, any follow-up questions for individual candidates after the conclusion of an official interview should only be for clarification purposes. If the interview panel or SO wants to ask new questions (i.e., topics not discussed during the official interview) or allow for additional explanations and/or submissions, all candidates should be afforded

an opportunity to provide additional information.

X. PROCEDURES:

(a) A panel member should be designated as the coordinator and he or she is responsible for the administrative and logistical arrangements of the interview and for documenting the process. Generally, this will be the SO if he or she is on the panel. If the SO is not on the panel, another panel member should be designated.

(b) The coordinator and/or SO must ensure that members of the panel have all of the necessary documents required to conduct the interview (candidate applications, interview guides, questions, procedures, rating form, etc.) in a reasonable amount of time before the interview takes place. A helpful list of common interviewer mistakes and errors can be found in *Appendix B: Common Rating Errors and Interviewing Mistakes*.

(c) Before an interview begins, the panel coordinator should verify that all panel members understand the procedures to be followed.

(d) Each panel member should independently review his/her notes immediately after the candidate leaves the room (or the interview concludes and the candidate is no longer present) and rate the candidate. Ratings should be specific and supported by information obtained during the interview, the applicant's resume, application, and any other documentation submitted (e.g., writing samples). Interviewers should include actual examples of answers provided, explanations of how these answers apply to the competency being rated and why they merit the rating.

(e) After the last candidate has been rated, panelists should review the ratings given to all candidates. This exchange will ensure the performance of each candidate has been considered thoroughly and objectively.

(f) All of the documentation must be given to the SO who is responsible for maintaining the file in accordance with EPA's Record Schedules.

(g) Regardless of the interview panel method used, the SO will use all of this information to make a sound judgment on whether to select a candidate from the certificate of eligibles.

XI. RECORDS:

Please see EPA's Record Schedules policies at <http://www.epa.gov/records/policy/schedule/index.htm> for detailed retention instructions for the following:

(a) EPA Records Schedule 556: Examining and Certification Records

(b) EPA Records Schedule 562: Merit Promotion Case Files.

(c) EPA Records Schedule 568: Personnel Correspondence Files
Related to General Administration.

**XII. MATERIALS
SUPERSEDED:**

None

Sharrelle Higgins /s/, Director
Human Resources Policy Division
Office of Human Resources

INTERVIEW POINTS TO CONSIDER

Subject	Appropriate/Inappropriate
Age	<p>Do not ask any question regarding an applicant's age.</p> <p>If the applicant is a minor, and proof of age is required, it is the servicing HR Shared Service Center's (SSC) responsibility to verify work eligibility.</p>
Citizenship	<p>Do not ask any question regarding an applicant's citizenship.</p> <p>It is the servicing SSC's responsibility to verify work eligibility on the basis of citizenship.</p> <p>Examples of inappropriate questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you a U.S. citizen? • Are your parents/spouse a U. S. citizen? • When did you become a U.S. citizen? • Are you/parents native born or naturalized?
National Origin	<p>Do not ask any question regarding an applicant's national origin.</p> <p>Examples of inappropriate questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Where were you born? • What language is spoken in your home? • What is your native language?
Race/Color	Do not ask any question regarding an applicant's race or color.
Religion	<p>Do not ask any question regarding an applicant's religion.</p> <p>Examples of inappropriate questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What church do you attend? • Which religious holidays do you observe?
Gender	Do not ask any question regarding an applicant's gender identity/expression.
Disability	<p>EPA may provide a reasonable accommodation to an applicant who is a qualified individual with a disability, and requires an accommodation to apply or be considered for a job.</p> <p>Please consult with your servicing SSC or the EPA Office of Civil Rights, should you receive an accommodation request from an applicant prior to an interview.</p> <p>Do not ask disability-related questions to an applicant until after the applicant has been given a conditional job offer. At that point you may ask limited questions about a reasonable accommodation to an applicant's disability if you reasonably believe that the applicant may need an accommodation because of an obvious or voluntarily disclosed disability, or where an applicant has disclosed a need for an accommodation.</p> <p>You may ask if the applicant will need an accommodation to perform a specific job duty, and if the answer is yes, you may then ask what the accommodation would be.</p> <p>Do not ask any questions about the nature or severity of an applicant's disability.</p>

Marital or Family Status	<p>Do not ask any question regarding an applicant's marital or family status.</p> <p>Examples of inappropriate questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are you divorced? • Are you widowed? • Who do you live with? • Do your children live with you? • How old are your children?
Education	<p>You may ask questions concerning an applicant's academic, vocational, or professional education as long as they pertain to the knowledge, skills, and abilities related to the position being filled.</p> <p>You cannot ask questions pertaining to the nationality, racial, or religious affiliation of an applicant's school.</p> <p>It is the servicing SSC's responsibility to verify educational requirements.</p>
Organizational Affiliation	<p>You may ask questions on this subject area only if they are specifically related to the job being filled, and the applicant's participation or membership in the organization in question helps fulfill a requirement for the position being filled; e.g., state bar membership for attorney positions.</p> <p>Example of an inappropriate question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To what organization, societies and clubs do you belong?
Criminal Record	<p>Do not ask questions regarding an applicant's criminal record; i.e., arrests, court appearances, convictions, etc., if not substantially related to functions and responsibilities of the particular job in question.</p> <p>It is the Personnel Security Branch's (PSB) responsibility to conduct background investigations for all EPA applicants and employees.</p>
Work/Travel Schedule	<p>If the job being filled has special requirements (i.e. travel, overtime, unusual hours, etc.) these conditions may be stated and inquired about.</p> <p>Example of an appropriate question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In this job you would have to travel one week every month. Does this present a problem for you? <p>Do not ask questions that relate to the applicant's child care arrangements, ages of children, or other non-job related areas.</p>
Military Discharge	<p>Do not ask questions regarding an applicant's military discharge.</p> <p>It is the PSB's responsibility to conduct background investigations for all EPA applicants and employees.</p> <p>It is the servicing SSC's responsibility to verify applicant's type of discharge.</p>
Credit Rating or Economic Status	<p>Do not ask questions regarding an applicant's credit rating or economic status unless such information is essential to the particular job in question.</p> <p>It is the PSB's responsibility to conduct background investigations for all EPA applicants and employees.</p>

Security Clearance	<p>If the job to be filled requires a certain type of security clearance, this condition may be stated.</p> <p>However, applicants may not be subjected to heightened security checks based on their religion or ethnicity. Do not ask questions regarding an applicant's religion or ethnicity.</p> <p>Example of an appropriate question:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This job requires a top secret clearance. Does this requirement present any problem? <p>It is the PSB's responsibility to conduct background investigations for all EPA applicants and employees.</p>
Participation In Certain Activities	<p>Do not ask any questions which appear to make participation in an activity not related to the duties of the position a condition to being hired.</p> <p>Examples of inappropriate questions:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do you plan to purchase U.S. savings bonds? • Do you plan to contribute to the Combined Federal Campaign?
Height and Weight	<p>Do not ask any question regarding an applicant's height, or weight, unless the need for this information is job-related.</p>
Miscellaneous	<p>You may notify the applicant that statements, misstatements, or omissions of significant facts in his/her application or during the applicant's interview, may be cause for non-selection.</p>

Common Rating Errors and Interviewing Mistakes¹

Common Rating Errors

One way to minimize rating errors is to make interviewers aware of the most common types of error, which are summarized below.

- 1. Rater Bias:** Allowing prejudices about certain groups of people or personalities to interfere with being able to fairly evaluate a candidate's performance. Interviewers should refrain from considering any non-performance related factors when making judgments.
- 2. Halo Effect:** Allowing ratings of performance in one competency to influence ratings for other competencies. For example, allowing a high rating on oral communication to bias the rating on problem solving, irrespective of the candidate's performance on problem solving.
- 3. Central Tendency:** A tendency to rate all competencies at the middle of the rating scale (for example, giving all "3s" on a 5-point scale). When hesitating over making a high rating, interviewers should realize such a rating does not indicate perfect performance; it means demonstrating more of the competency than is generally exhibited. Similarly, when hesitating over a low rating, interviewers should realize it does not mean the candidate does not possess the competency; it means he/she did not demonstrate much of the competency in his/her interview responses.
- 4. Leniency:** A tendency to give high ratings to all candidates, irrespective of their actual performance. There may be candidates who could benefit from further development in certain areas. Interviewers should allow their ratings to reflect these intra- and inter-individual differences.
- 5. Strictness:** A tendency to give low ratings to all candidates, irrespective of their actual performance. There may be outstanding candidates whose demonstration of competencies warrants high ratings. Interviewers should allow their ratings to reflect these intra- and inter-individual differences.
- 6. Similar to Me:** Giving higher than deserved ratings to candidates who appear similar to you. People have a natural tendency to prefer others who are similar in various ways to themselves. Interviewers should concentrate on the responses given by the candidate in making evaluations, rather than on the outward characteristics and personality of the candidate.

Interviewers can minimize these rating errors by thoroughly understanding the competencies being assessed and by learning to compare the behaviors exhibited in the interview with the behaviors anchoring the proficiency-level ratings for each competency.

Common Interviewing Mistakes

- 1. Relying on First Impressions:** Interviewers tend to make rapid decisions about the qualifications of a candidate within the first few minutes of the interview based on minimal

¹ U.S. Office of Personnel Management's *Structured Interviews: A Practical Guide*

information. Interviewers should reserve their judgment until sufficient information on the candidate has been gathered.

2. **Negative Emphasis:** Unfavorable information tends to be more influential and memorable than favorable information. Interviewers should avoid focusing on negative information to the exclusion of positive information.

3. **Not Knowing the Job:** Interviewers who do not have a comprehensive understanding of the skills needed for the job often form their own opinion about what constitutes the best candidate. They use this personal impression to evaluate candidates. Therefore, it is important to make sure interviewers fully understand the requirements of the job.

4. **Pressure to Hire:** When interviewers believe they need to make a decision quickly, they tend to make decisions based on a limited sample of information, or on a small number of candidate interviews. Interviewers should adhere to the established interview procedure and timeline with each candidate to avoid making erroneous decisions.

5. **Contrast Effects:** The order in which the candidates are interviewed can affect the ratings given to candidates. While making ratings, interviewers should refrain from comparing and contrasting candidates to those who have been previously interviewed.

6. **Nonverbal Behavior:** Interviewers should base their evaluation of the candidate on the candidate's past performance and current behavior as it relates to the competency being evaluated and *not* just on how the candidate acts during the interview. Questions and probes relating to the competencies of interest will usually direct the interviewer to the important information.